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ABSTRACT

The first in a series reporting on strategies to improve children's readiness for school and to help schools be better prepared to meet the needs of all children, this report traces Arkansas' efforts to improve reading instruction. This issue discusses the following topics: (1) Reading in the First Grade: Now or Never? (2) Limitations and Innovations; (3) Early Literacy Small Group Instruction; (4) Supportive Classrooms; (5) Supportive Schools; (6) The Arkansas Early Childhood Initiative; (7) Summer School and Staff Development; and (8) Educational Cooperatives. A special emphasis in this issue is Reading Recovery, a short-termm research-based, early-intervention program for first-grade children with serious reading problems. Reading Recovery's effectiveness in reducing referrals to special education, other benefits of the program, and the training of Reading Recovery teachers are also discussed. The issue concludes by noting that Reading Recovery is not a mandatory part of the school curriculum, thus necessitating an increased awareness of the program so that other children may gain this benefit. Contains 10 references. (WJC)

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PATHS TO SUCCESS

school readiness for children and schools - birth to grade 3

Volume 1 July 1996

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Getting Elementary Schools Ready for Children: Reading First

"Children are turning into success stories instead of failures."

"All of the first grade children who have been at this school all year are good readers now!"

— Two Arkansas elementary school principals

This is the first in a series of SREB's Paths to Success *that will report on strategies to improve children's readiness for school and to help schools be better prepared to meet the needs of all children. Because of its critical importance, reading will be the top priority.*

The 1994 SREB report Getting Schools Ready for Children: The Other Side of the Readiness Goal *stressed the need for change in the nation's elementary schools. No matter how successful we may be in our efforts to improve children's readiness for school, the benefits of such efforts can be undermined very quickly if schools are not ready to help children sustain those gains.*

Getting schools ready for all children will require changes in elementary school classrooms as well as new and better ways to help children with serious learning problems. On the surface, it might appear that these are two distinct issues. But effective early intervention programs and changes in general classroom practice must go hand-in-hand.

Arkansas' experience linking an early intervention program called Reading Recovery with broader efforts to help elementary schools change provides an example of this relationship. Reading Recovery is also a good example of a specialized intervention program that appears to produce substantially better results for children who are at risk of failing to learn to read than many of the models used in the past.

Future issues of SREB's Paths to Success *will explore alternative approaches to improving young children's reading skills, as well as other topics that relate to readiness. The emphasis will be on programs that, like Reading Recovery, have a proven record of success and offer valuable lessons for those who make decisions about education policies.*

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Reading in First Grade: Now or Never?

The ability to read is essential to success. Most children who cannot read at or near grade level by the end of third grade are doomed to educational failure. It is equally clear that the traditional approach of retaining such children in one or more grades while providing them with decelerated, rather than accelerated, remedial reading instruction only ensures that they will fall farther behind.

Early in 1988, a group of Arkansas educators, legislators, state officials, foundation executives and other community leaders came together to address this problem. They were particularly interested in an intensive one-to-one tutoring program for first graders called Reading Recovery. (See page 9.)

After a year of critical study, the Reading Recovery Advisory Committee recommended implementation of the program on a pilot basis. The University of Arkansas at Little Rock was selected to coordinate and serve as the training center for the project.

With funding provided by the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, the university and business leaders, the first Arkansas Reading Recovery teacher-leader was trained in 1990. Subsequently, the Arkansas General Assembly appropriated additional funds to support the program.

By the beginning of the 1995-96 school year, 106 Reading Recovery teachers and eight teacher-leaders were providing tutoring to children in more than 50 Arkansas schools, representing 20 percent of all school systems in the state. Another 57 Reading Recovery teachers completed their training in May 1996, further expanding the capacity of the program.

Through the first four years of implementation in Arkansas, a total of 1,088 children received a full program of Reading Recovery tutoring. Of that number, 86 percent were able to attain reading levels comparable to the average of their classmates. (See page 4.)

Limitations and Innovations

From the start, supporters of Reading Recovery in Arkansas knew that to achieve the maximum impact from a strategy involving one-to-one tutoring they would have to find creative ways to stretch limited budgets. One Reading Recovery teacher can typically provide one-to-one tutoring to 8-12 children per year. As a result, schools may find it difficult to employ enough qualified teachers to serve all children who need early reading intervention—approximately one Reading Recovery teacher for a typical group of 50 first graders.

"My child learned to read! She could barely read her own name at the beginning of school, and because of Reading Recovery she is now one of the top readers in her class."

— A parent of a Reading Recovery student

A further concern was that the benefits of Reading Recovery to individual children might be reduced and even reversed if their classroom teachers were not prepared to provide ongoing support.

These concerns were addressed using a three-tiered approach to primary reading instruction. In addition to one-to-one tutoring for children most in need of help, an Early Literacy Program for small groups of children was developed based on the same principles as Reading Recovery. Through the small groups, more children can be served than would be possible using Reading Recovery alone.

At the same time, a program was developed to give classroom teachers up-to-date training in current principles of early literacy. This training not only enables the teachers to provide classroom support to Reading Recovery students, but also strengthens their skills in teaching reading to all students.

Early Literacy Small Group Instruction

Because of the intensity of the one-to-one instruction, Reading Recovery teachers normally spend only half of their time providing individual tutoring. The remainder of the teacher's day may be spent in any number of activities. Some return to being classroom teachers, while others provide different types of special education services.

In the Arkansas Early Literacy Program, the Reading Recovery teachers devote the other half of their time to working with small groups of five children each.

In these small groups, the teachers are able to begin helping students who cannot be accommodated in one-to-one tutoring at the beginning of the year, giving them a head start when space opens for them. The small groups also give children with less severe problems who might never receive one-to-one tutoring an opportunity to benefit from the expertise of Reading Recovery teachers. (Only the actual one-to-one tutoring program is properly termed Reading Recovery.)

In practice, many of the children served in early literacy groups in Arkansas have been able to reach grade level in reading through small group instruction alone. And those who do enter one-to-one tutoring after participating in small group instruction are usually able to reach grade level in significantly less time than comparable students who enter Reading Recovery without small group instruction. Consequently, more children can be offered one-to-one tutoring in the course of a school year.

The result of the small group program is to increase the number of children one teacher can serve in a year from a maximum of 16 to more than 50, providing a substantially greater return on the investment in the teacher's specialized training.

Supportive Classrooms

Experience in Arkansas and across the country has shown that many first grade teachers are skeptical about Reading Recovery initially but become believers when they see dramatic changes in children who complete the program. As a result, the classroom teachers become interested in learning about the theoretical basis of Reading Recovery. Some of these teachers become Reading Recovery teachers themselves. Perhaps more important, other teachers incorporate many of the basic literacy principles into their general classroom work.

"Several students at the beginning of the school year could not read. Now they are some of the most fluent readers in the first grade."

— An Arkansas first grade teacher

As the first groups of Reading Recovery students in Arkansas advanced to second grade and beyond, the issue became whether gains could be sustained. Early follow-up studies suggested that the answer depends to a large extent on how effectively second, third, and later grade teachers support these children. And it was apparent that many classrooms were ill-prepared to provide the necessary support.

To help remedy this situation, second grade maintenance literacy groups were established. These groups are based on the model of the first grade early literacy groups and are also taught by Reading Recovery teachers. The groups meet two to three days per week for six to eight weeks at the beginning of second grade. Their primary purpose is to provide reinforcement to students who previously completed Reading Recovery tutoring as well as those who began the program too late in the school year to receive the needed number of lessons.

But these second grade maintenance literacy groups have also had an impact on second grade teachers. They have help make many second grades more supportive not only of former Reading Recovery students but of all other children

Students in the Arkansas Reading Recovery Program 1991-1995

Table 1
End-of-Year Status and Success Rates

Year	Total Children Served	Received Full Program	Attained Grade Level	Success Rate for Children Receiving Full Program
Year 1 (1991-92)	110	66 (60 %)	59	89 %
Year 2 (1992-93)	232	152 (66 %)	127	84 %
Year 3 (1993-94)	418	295 (71 %)	270	92 %
Year 4 (1994-95)	828	575 (69 %)	484	84 %
Total	**1,588**	**1,088 (69 %)**	**940**	**86 %**

Table 1 shows the numbers of children served by the Arkansas Reading Recovery program during its first four years. Children receiving a full program include all who successfully attain grade level plus those who receive a minimum of 60 lessons but fail to attain grade level.

The difference between the total number served and full-program children is accounted for by two factors: 1) children who begin the program but leave the school before receiving 60 lessons; and 2) children who begin the program too late in the school year to complete 60 lessons. Overall, approximately 70 percent of all children who begin the program complete it.

Table 2 displays end-of-year comparison scores on text reading levels for successful Reading Recovery children and non-Reading Recovery children selected in a random sample. A reading level of 14-16 is considered normal for the end of first grade. In each of the first four years of implementation, the average end-of-year text reading level of discontinued children was within the average band for non-Reading Recovery children.

Table 3 displays the results of follow-up evaluations of the initial 1991-92 group of 59 successful Reading Recovery children at the end of second and third grade. The Reading Recovery students continued to perform at higher levels than the random sample of non-Reading Recovery students on dictation, spelling, and text reading through the fourth grade.

Table 2
End-of-Year Text Reading Levels: Successful Reading Recovery Children Compared to a Selected Random Sample of Non-Reading Recovery Children

Year of Testing	Successful Reading Recovery Children	Random Sample Children
Year 1 (1991-92)	17	14
Year 2 (1992-93)	15	12
Year 3 (1993-94)	17	13
Year 4 (1994-95)	17	18

Table 3
Performance in Second and Third Grades of Successful Year 1 Reading Recovery Children Compared to a Selected Random Sample of Non-Reading Recovery Children

Measures with Maximum Scores	Reading Recovery	Random Sample	Average Range of Random Sample
Grade 2			
Dictation (64)	59	55	51-59
Spelling (18)	13	11	9-13
Text Reading (34)	26	22	17-26
Grade 3			
Dictation (64)	58	56	52-61
Spelling (18)	12	12	10-14
Text Reading (34)	30	28	23-32

SOURCE: All data provided by the University of Arkansas at Little Rock

as well. The maintenance group model has worked so well that some schools have implemented third grade maintenance literacy groups.

The success of the early literacy small group program in preparing children to succeed in Reading Recovery also prompted the development of kindergarten literacy groups. In these groups, the Reading Recovery teachers work with low-achieving children as they approach the end of kindergarten to introduce them to basic literacy concepts. These children enter first grade better prepared to benefit from one-to-one tutoring and/or small group instruction.

"I've found a program that works with Chapter 1 students, one in which children can be successful and don't have to return year after year."

— A Reading Recovery teacher in training

Supportive Schools

The addition of the first grade early literacy groups, second and third grade maintenance groups and kindergarten literacy groups has been an important factor in the success of the Reading Recovery program in Arkansas. The small group programs have benefited the students and built much-needed support for the program among classroom teachers.

The result is that teachers in schools with Reading Recovery and small group programs tend to become better prepared to meet the diverse needs of all children. The ways in which teachers organize their classrooms and use written materials have changed dramatically in some schools. The positive impact of the overall reading initiative is apparent in the high degree of enthusiasm expressed by teachers, administrators and parents.

Another measure of the program's success is a decline in the number of children assigned to special education. (See Page 7.) One Arkansas school reported that only five children had been assigned to special education during the first three years of the program, compared to 19 children for the three previous years. It is not unusual to find former Reading Recovery students among the highest achieving students in their second and third grade classrooms.

The Arkansas Early Childhood Initiative

In early 1993, the Governor announced that the Arkansas Department of Education would spearhead an Early Childhood Initiative to "provide a solid foundation for learning during the kindergarten and primary years."

The Early Childhood Initiative involves wide-ranging efforts to improve children's readiness for school. These include early intervention services for infants and toddlers, parent support programs like the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY), and improved availability of quality child care.

At the kindergarten and elementary school level, the initiative has focused on providing extra help for children having academic difficulties and on retraining teachers and administrators to improve their ability to help children with learning problems.

Summer School and Staff Development

One of the cornerstones of the Early Childhood Initiative is the summer school program created by the Arkansas General Assembly in 1993. This program, which is mandatory for school districts and free to students, is aimed at all K-3 students who are "not performing at grade level during the regular school year."

To ensure that the summer program would not simply repeat in compressed form a student's experience during the school year, the legislation specified that neither teachers or principals could participate in (or be *compensated* for) the summer school program unless they completed either a

"I'm growing as a teacher, and my children are growing as readers."

— A classroom teacher on staff development meetings led by a Reading Recovery teacher

special seven-day training session or a six credit-hour graduate course called the "K-4 Crusade." The emphasis in both programs is on an interdisciplinary approach which emphasizes:

- Diverse teaching strategies stressing language and hands-on learning;
- Skills taught in context rather than in isolation;
- Modification of the daily schedule to allow large blocks of time for learning;
- Meaningful involvement of parents in their child's learning;
- Ongoing assessment of progress, including collections of students' work.

The training programs are open to teachers in grades K-6. By the summer of 1995, approximately 5,000 teachers and administrators had completed one or both programs. More people have requested training than the two programs can accommodate. Some schools want to have their entire staffs trained.

More than 18,000 students across the state participated in the summer school program in its first year. The program was so successful that the legislature expanded it to include fourth grade in 1995; fifth grade will be added in the summer of 1996.

Reading Recovery and Special Education

The experience of school districts across the country shows that Reading Recovery can have a significant impact in reducing the number of children referred to special education or other remedial services. One national study found that the percentage of children retained in first grade in urban school districts dropped by more than 70 percent while special education assignments fell by almost two-thirds following the implementation of Reading Recovery (Lyons, 1994).

The savings that can result from such reductions are substantially greater than the costs of providing Reading Recovery. The dollar cost of retaining one child in first grade for one year or of providing five years* of traditional Chapter 1 services has been estimated at approximately two-and-a-half times the cost of providing that child with Reading Recovery tutoring. The cost of six years* of special education is nearly five times the cost of Reading Recovery (Dyer, 1992).

Perhaps as important as the dollar savings are the potential savings in time. The average Reading Recovery child spends 40 hours receiving one-to-one tutoring during his or her first grade year. The average child receiving Chapter 1 services requires an average of 100 hours a year for five years, while the average special education student requires 250 hours a year for six years (Dyer, 1992).

When children are pulled out of their regular classrooms to receive Chapter 1 and special education services, they are missing out on far more classroom time than if they completed Reading Recovery successfully. When special services are provided by regular classroom teachers, they represent time the teachers cannot spend working with the rest of the class.

* These are national averages for time spent per child in Chapter 1 or special education in elementary schools. Costs of services beyond elementary school are not included.

Educational Cooperatives

Since 1984, Arkansas has had a system of 15 Regional Education Service Cooperatives funded through the state Department of Education. The purpose of these cooperatives is to provide technical assistance and training to member school districts.

In its 1995 appropriation for education, the General Assembly set aside funding to pay for the training of Reading Recovery teacher-leaders in 10 of the cooperatives. At the same time, the Department of Education was seeking support for an early childhood specialist in each cooperative who could provide leadership in staff development.

As the summer school program was implemented, the common ground connecting it to Reading Recovery was increasingly apparent. Classroom teachers in schools with Reading Recovery were found to be especially interested in the training opportunities connected to summer school. And teachers and administrators who went through the training programs became more receptive to Reading Recovery.

"I've learned a lot of strategies to use with these students in my classroom. Reading Recovery strategies work with all children. I love this program!"

— An Arkansas first grade teacher

The demonstrated link between Reading Recovery and staff development led to a decision to combine the two functions in a single person. In the summer of 1995, the Department of Education announced that the 10 regional Reading Recovery teacher-leaders would form the first group of Regional Early Childhood (K-4) Curriculum Specialists. In addition to Reading Recovery training, curriculum specialists were enrolled in the graduate program to begin broadening their role.

The responsibilities of the early childhood specialists include providing training and technical assistance in the areas of early literacy and Reading Recovery, child development and learning, curriculum and assessment, and parental involvement. By 1996-97, all 15 cooperatives will have Curriculum Specialists with training in Reading Recovery.

Conclusion

With the authorization of combined Reading Recovery Teacher-Leader/Early Childhood Specialists in the Regional Education Service Cooperatives, Arkansas will have a coordinated support system for promoting needed change in elementary classrooms and providing effective early intervention services for children.

An important factor in the success of Arkansas' efforts in reading has been that implementation is a matter of local choice. Individual schools and entire systems have chosen to use Reading Recovery. There has been no attempt to force the program on schools or teachers.

Typically, changes in classroom practice evolve gradually, one or two classrooms at a time. The philosophy of program leaders in both Reading Recovery and the Early Childhood Initiative is that all teachers want to do what they think is best for children, and the best way to promote change is by example. If Reading Recovery and the other early literacy initiatives can continue to offer hope to children who previously had little or none, these programs should become increasingly difficult for teachers and administrators to ignore.

What is Reading Recovery?

Reading Recovery is a short-term, research-based early intervention program for first grade children with serious reading problems. Specially trained Reading Recovery teachers work with these children individually to help them develop a variety of reading strategies so they can become independent readers able to continue progressing on their own.

Who benefits from Reading Recovery?

Typically, the range of reading levels of children entering first grade is wide. At the lower extreme, some children may lack such basic concepts as the ability to distinguish between words and letters or the front and back of a book.

During the pre-school years, most children are read to, look at picture books, and see adults and older children reading. Children raised in impoverished homes or by parents who are fully or partially illiterate may not have these experiences. In addition, some children who have been exposed to books and reading may be unable to build basic reading skills because of physical or emotional problems that interfere with the way they process information.

Reading Recovery is designed to help children replicate missing concepts and overcome confusion, whatever the source.

How does it work?

At the beginning of the school year, each classroom teacher identifies entering first graders who may be at risk of reading failure. The Reading Recovery teacher then uses a standardized assessment to identify the lowest-achieving 20 percent of readers in the class. Each child is assessed on six measures: 1) letter identification, 2) known words, 3) concepts about print, 4) writing vocabulary, 5) hearing and recording sounds and 6) text reading level.

Children at the highest risk of reading failure receive one-to-one instruction for 30 minutes daily for a maximum of 20 weeks. During each lesson, the teacher uses a wide range of skills to tailor moment-to-moment interactions that build on the child's individual strengths. The teacher systematically records the child's responses to a variety of tasks related to reading and uses this information to shape subsequent instruction.

One-to-one instruction continues until the child is able to read independently at an average first grade level. The child is then "discontinued" and another child is given the opportunity to receive tutoring. Data on Reading Recovery nationwide indicate that 80 to 90 percent of all children who complete at least 12 weeks of the program will be successfully discontinued. Most children complete the program successfully in 12 to 16 weeks.

Most Reading Recovery teachers work only half time tutoring individual children. The other half of the teacher's time may be spent in other activities such as teaching children in a regular classroom or training classroom teachers in reading strategies. As a result, one teacher can provide one-to-one tutoring to four children at any given time. In most cases, children with the greatest deficiencies are served first; others enter the program as these children are discontinued.

How are Reading Recovery teachers trained?

Reading Recovery teacher training requires a half-time commitment for one academic year, during which the trainee continues to work full time at his or her home school. Under the supervision of a teacher-leader, the trainee spends half of the school day working directly with children and attends weekly classes with other teacher trainees. Both during the initial training year and after, teachers meet on a regular basis to share insights and experiences and observe each other working with children "behind the glass" (a teaching facility equipped with a one-way mirror).

Reading Recovery teachers are trained by *teacher-leaders* who also provide technical support, conduct ongoing program evaluations and provide direct one-to-one tutoring to individual children. School systems may employ their own teacher-leaders or contract for these services.

Teacher-leaders are trained by *teacher-leader trainers* who are usually affiliated with a university-based regional training center. Teacher-leader trainers provide technical support to both teacher-leaders and teachers and also conduct research on program outcomes and implementation issues. Teacher-leader trainers are also expected to spend part of their time providing direct tutoring services to children.

At each level of Reading Recovery training, the trainees earn post-baccalaureate credit at a designated institution of higher education.

The cost of training a Reading Recovery teacher includes half-time graduate tuition and fees; the cost of textbooks, children's books, and supplies; half-time teacher salary and fringe benefits during the training year; and the cost of the teacher-leader who does the training. Most school systems have used Chapter 1 funds to pay the costs.

Where is Reading Recovery used?

Originally developed in New Zealand, Reading Recovery was brought to the United States in the mid-1980s as a collaborative effort between the Ohio Department of Education, The Ohio State University, and the Columbus Public Schools. In 1987, the program was recognized by the U.S. Department of Education's National Diffusion Network, which provided funding to help disseminate it in other states.

A key to Reading Recovery's success in widely varying school systems across the country is its emphasis on quality and consistency of training. The name Reading Recovery is a royalty-free trademark and/or service mark of The Ohio State University. School systems or other sponsoring entities must agree to follow the *Guidelines and Standards for the North American Reading Recovery Council* in order to be granted a royalty-free license to use the name.

By 1995-96, Reading Recovery programs were operating in 47 states and the District of Columbia, including all 15 SREB states. Reading Recovery Regional Training Centers are currently in operation in seven SREB states. (See page 12.)

A Leadership Tool in Texas

The Carrollton-Farmers Branch Independent School District near Dallas, Texas, was selected during the 1989-90 school year to be one of the first four districts to participate in the SREB-NationsBank Leadership Academy. The district identified Goal 1—school readiness—as its top priority.

In that same year, the district implemented a Reading Recovery program as a way to "assist at-risk youngsters before they fall into remedial status."

By 1994-95, the program had grown to include 32 Reading Recovery teachers serving 19 elementary schools. In its first five years, more than 1,100 students completed the program, with 930 (84 percent) successfully discontinued.

As in Arkansas, Reading Recovery in Carrollton-Farmers Branch has had an impact well beyond the individual children who receive tutoring. Teachers and principals say the program has resulted in across-the-board improvement in reading instruction.

A cost analysis conducted by the school system concluded that if each Reading Recovery teacher could prevent two children from being retained in first grade and one from being assigned to special education each year, the cost savings for these three children alone would be equal to almost three times the teacher's half-time annual salary.

Does it really work?

Research has consistently shown that Reading Recovery can dramatically improve the reading and writing skills of children who otherwise would be unlikely to reach grade level by the end of first grade.

Reading Recovery is a good example of an effective alternative to failed strategies like retention. The one-time cost of providing Reading Recovery tutoring must be weighed against the cost of putting a child through an additional year (or years) of school and/or providing years of special education services.

Beyond the cost savings that result from replacing failed strategies with new ones that work, the most promising effect of Reading Recovery may be its capacity to excite and reinvigorate teachers who have become discouraged by watching children fail and being unable to help.

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Reading Recovery Regional Training Centers in the SREB States

Arkansas: The University of Arkansas at Little Rock

Georgia: Georgia State University, Atlanta

Mississippi: Jackson State University

North Carolina: The University of North Carolina at Wilmington

South Carolina: Clemson University

Texas: Texas Woman's University, Denton

West Virginia: West Virginia Graduate College, Institute

"I read to my little sister at home."

"I love to read and write now."

— Successful Reading Recovery students

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